

Prevention of youth violence – what is learned can be unlearned

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The majority of young people in South Africa are repeatedly exposed to violence in their homes, at school, in the communities where they live, as well as in the media. The normalisation of violence has become embedded in many societies. Subsequently young people are more than likely to get caught up in the cycle of violence, as victims and often also perpetrators of violence. This article presents a theoretical and empirical analysis of the role that youth programmes can play in the prevention of youth violence and crime. An integrated theoretical approach was followed making use of Bandura's social learning theory of aggression and his social cognitive theory. A quantitative study, more specifically evaluation research, was used to assess the effectiveness of Khulisa Crime Prevention Initiative's Silence the Violence programme. Findings from the study established that this programme facilitates behaviour modification, thereby creating the opportunity for participants to learn alternative non-violent behaviour patterns. The article concludes with a discussion of operational challenges which hinders the implementation of youth violence prevention programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide children are raised in societies characterised by the breakdown of family systems, unemployment, high levels of substance abuse and widespread violence. Hence, many children are deprived of positive role models that a pro-social community could offer. In many societies crime and violence has permeated areas, such as schools, homes, shopping malls and public places, which traditionally were perceived as "safe zones" (Burton 2007:2). Research indicated that young people who are exposed to violence are themselves more likely to get caught up in the cycle of violence, as victims and/or perpetrators (Holtmann and Badenhorst 2010). Hence, sadly, our youth have become more than mere victims, in many cases, they are the perpetrators of crime and violence.

Pavlov, Watson and Skinner, are early learning theorists who laid the foundation for the belief that people learned by observing others (Shaffer 2009:292). Bandura elaborated on the work of these theorists and developed the social learning theory of aggression. He focused on the interaction between the environment, cognitions and attitudes and proposed that aggression is learned through a process of behaviour modeling (Shaffer 2009:292). The Blueprint for Violence Prevention, that was developed by the Centre for the Study of Prevention and Violence (Siegel and Welsh 2008:424), postulates that effective programmes can not only prevent violence but can also be used to break behavioural patterns associated with violent

behaviour. It can therefore be argued that what is learned can be unlearned and new ways of behaving can be adopted.

Youth violence is an internationally recognised problem and highlights the importance of prevention initiatives aimed at the development of constructive alternatives for "at risk" children before they are drawn into a delinquent lifestyle. In this regard The National Crime Prevention Strategy (1996) and The White Paper for Social Welfare (1997) emphasizes pro-active crime prevention as the ideal, instead of reactive crime control. This could be accomplished, according to these two documents, by means of social development programmes (Schoeman 2003:2). Against the background of the ever continuing "what works" debate and the search for "good practices", a theoretical and empirical analysis of the role that youth programmes can play in the prevention of crime and violence will be discussed. Findings from an empirical study which evaluated the effectiveness of the Silence the Violence programme will be presented as an example of a prevention initiative which has been proven to be effective in the prevention of youth violence.

NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

A large number of South African youth are victims of violence, or are exposed to violence on a daily basis (Burton 2008:xi-xii). Pelsers (2008:8) postulates that in general South Africa's youth has normalised illegitimate means, such as crime and violence, as a method to acquire status or to establish control over

their environment. A study exploring the causes of xenophobia is an example of an instance where violent behaviour is normalised.

In this study, participants explained that the xenophobic attacks against Somalie shopkeepers happened because “the people are hungry” (Cooper 2009). According to Cooper (2009) the term “hunger” was used metaphorically and described their desire to have luxury items, such as a cellphone, television and car which they perceive the Somalia shopkeepers to have. In this instance, the resentment and frustration experienced by these youths became an acceptable motive for the violent attacks. Burton (2007:2) concurs, stating that in South Africa youth violence has become entrenched in society.

Principles for violent behaviour are set in communities, households and the media and encourage violent solutions to disagreements or interpersonal tension. As a result, young people learn to use violence pre-emptively (Bell 2007:111; Ward 2007:64). In many instances violence has become a method of emotional protection for today’s youth. People who are constantly exposed to violence may adopt violent methods themselves. In a study conducted amongst 9 to 15 year old youths, it was found that 30 to 40 percent of the children who reported being exposed to violence, display significant violent behaviour themselves. (Siegel 2010:305).

Each society has a culture that embodies its values, norms and beliefs. In violent societies, the social hierarchy often supports the formation of groups, which sustain a culture of violence in society, such as gangs. It was further found, that pre-violence attitudes of influential figures, such as community leaders, parents and peers contributed to the culture of violence thus reinforcing the established values, norms and beliefs (Swart and Bredekamp 2009:419). Therefore, in order to change the behaviour of an individual you also need to change the culture (e.g. values, norms and beliefs) of society in general.

Effective prevention strategies need to be based on a sound understanding of the risk factors and social dynamics of the phenomenon and should be validated by scientific research. The first phase in the development of any crime prevention initiative should be problem identification and planning. O’Mahony (2009:99) proposes that the most influential studies in youth crime prevention are

longitudinal investigations conducted from early childhood and retrospective cross-sectional investigations.

Program evaluation is another important factor to which attention should be given. In this regard Frank (2003:24) stated that organisations, such as NGO’s are not committed to evaluate crime prevention initiatives and programmes, and this presents great problems for the construction of a knowledge base that can be used by others. Evaluation studies with a high methodical rigour should be integrated in programme development and implementation. The ability to learn from other “good practices” is currently a weakness in amongst others, crime prevention initiatives (Frank 2003:24).

Nearly one-third (31.4%) of South Africa’s population is under the age of 15 years (Statistics South Africa 2009). In these phases of development young people are still in a process of social, emotional and cognitive development. Hence, the potential exists to change existing anti-social behaviour into pro-social behaviour patterns. Furthermore article 28(2) of South Africa’s Constitution stipulates that “A child’s best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child”. Developmental and preventative initiatives which target South Africa’s youth, should therefore not only be a priority but is also vital for effective crime and violence prevention.

In the majority of cases in South Africa, organisations in civil society, such as Khulisa Crime Prevention initiative, take responsibility for youth prevention interventions. These organisations are dependent on funding from government as well as other non-governmental sources. The result is that projects are often hampered by a lack in funding (Merrifield 2010).

Henceforth, a theoretical explanation to substantiate the role youth programmes can play in the prevention of crime and violence will be discussed.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATION

For the purpose of this article an integrated theoretical approach will be followed. Integrated theories combine two or more traditionally separate models to form one unified explanatory theory (Tibbets and Hemmens 2010:648). In this article Albert Bandura’s social learning theory of aggression

and his social cognitive theory will be utilised to explain the process associated with learning and unlearning of violent attitudes and behaviour.

Bandura proposed that aggressive behaviour is learned by means of the observation of models of violence (Pajares 2002). He explains psychological functioning through a process called reciprocal determinism. This method involves a process of sustained, reciprocal interaction between behaviour, cognitive and environmental influences. Therapy and counseling are facilitated by the reciprocal nature of these determinants of human functioning (Pajares 2002). Bandura emphasises the role that cognitive processes play in the acquisition of behaviour (Tibbets and Hemmens 2010:445-446). For the purpose of this article processes associated with the development as well as maintenance and reinforcement of violent behaviour is of importance.

According to Bandura's social learning theory, aggressive behaviour is acquired by means of family and sub-cultural influences, symbolic modeling and direct experiences (Tibbets and Hemmens 2010:446). Nucleus families play an important role in the learning of aggressive responses. It was found that young people who display aggressive behaviour often come from families in which aggressive modeling takes place or from families which support aggressive behaviour as a method of conflict resolution (Burton 2008:xi-xii).

Sub-cultural influences refer to the influence that larger systems have on the learning of aggressive behaviour. Bandura (Shaffer 2009:308) postulates that the cultural values and norms a society adheres to may generate aggressive people, if a great deal of value is attached to aggressive models, for example in gangs, or if aggressive actions are rewarded. Aggression in sports is an example of a scenario where sub-cultural influences can promote the learning of aggressive behaviour patterns (Kreager 2007:705-724).

In many societies sport play an important role in the hierarchical structure associated with status in peer friendship systems. A good athlete is generally respected by peers and in the local community. In a school where sport, and more specifically performance in sport, is idolised students, regardless of their athleticism, tend to orientate their behaviours toward these activities. Students also tend to define their own

identities in relation to the most popular athletes and the "popular" group (Kreager 2007:705). In this instance, if physical aggression is associated with success and it increases a student's status it might result in off-the field violence.

This violence is often directed toward perceived outsiders and "weaker" students. Consequently, aggression in sport becomes socially acceptable resulting in coaches, peers, parents, and the media reinforcing such behaviour (Kreager 2007:705).

Symbolic modeling refers to the influence which visual and written media has on the learning of aggressive behaviour. Research conducted on crime trends and strategies in the future predict that technology will be the most significant factor which will have an influence on the nature of crime (Bell 2007:112). The media frequently provide children with criminal role models. This contributes to the development and maintenance of pro-violence norms which was found to increase the risk for youth violence (Ward 2007:64, 65).

According to Bandura (Pajares 2002) patterns of behaviour can furthermore be shaped by means of reward and punishment. Through direct experiences successful actions is reinforced and unsuccessful actions eliminated. Bandura also focused on the cognitive processes involved in the learning of aggressive behavior (Tibbets and Hemmens 2010:445, 446). For example, during the cognitive process where victims try to understand their victimisation they might come to the conclusion that "violence is a necessary evil in the world". Subsequently, the victim might then also resort to violence due to an internalisation of this cognitive belief (Siegel 2010:304). Perpetrators of violence living in society with pro-violent values and norms might use similar cognitive processes to rationalise their behaviour.

Bandura's social learning theory also deals with the maintenance and reinforcement of aggressive behavior (Pajares 2002). Aggressive behaviour can firstly be maintained and reinforced by means of direct external reinforcement. In this instance a tangible reward, such as social status, will increase the likelihood of aggressive behaviour re-occurring (Pajares 2002). In some instances, aggressive behaviour might be inhibited if the victim display signs of pain or injury. In South Africa, where crimes are frequently characterised by motiveless violence, it is hypothesised that the

violent nature of the crime may be ascribed to offenders not having empathy or compassion for victims. Research exploring the criminal subculture concluded that in delinquent groups members often exhibited a lack of compassion and empathy for their victims (Burn & Brown 2006:230). This lack of empathy and compassion suggests an inability to distinguish between good and bad (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation 1998). In this instance aggressive behaviour is reinforced and maintained by the pro-criminal values and norms prevalent in this group.

Bandura proposes that the observation of aggressive behaviour by others has the same effect as the direct experience thereof (Tibbets and Hemmens 2010:445, 446). Direct external reinforcement refers to the phenomenon where an observer will internalise aggressive behaviour he or she is exposed to. In this instance the communal ratification of violent behaviour by others stimulate the learning of similar behaviour. Contradictory, the disapproval of the same behaviour will result in the learning process being inhibited. An example of this method of behaviour reinforcement was discussed earlier in the explanation of violence in sport (compare Kreager 2007:705-724).

The third method of reinforcement Bandura discusses is self-reinforcement (Tibbets and Hemmens 2010:445, 446). In this instance Bandura proposes that people act in order to gain a sense of self-satisfaction and self-worth (Pajares 2002). Self-reward will therefore reinforce violent behaviour while self-punishment will inhibit it. Perpetrators of violence often develop mechanisms to neutralise feelings of self-condemnation, such as justification and rationalisation of their aggression and dehumanising and blaming the victim. These methods of neutralisation may result in gradual desensitisation consequently inhibiting self-condemnation and self-punishment behaviour in perpetrators of violence.

In terms of this article, the reciprocal interaction between the acquiring of violent behaviour and the maintenance and reinforcement thereof is of importance. The cognitive processes associated with the learning of aggressive behaviour and the subsequent methods which could result in the inhibition of aggressive behaviour will furthermore be explored.

In the 1970's Bandura developed the concept self-efficacy which lies at the center of his social cognitive theory (Bandura 1994). Self-efficacy explores the role self-beliefs play in the learning of behaviour. It represents people's perceptions and conviction pertaining to the goals they can achieve. A strong sense of efficacy enhances a person's ability to approach difficult tasks as achievable challenges, rather than view these tasks as threats which should be avoided. People's beliefs relating to their efficacy can be developed by four main sources of influence, namely, personal experiences, social modeling, social persuasion and the modification of negative emotional cognitions (Bandura 1994).

Bandura identified four processes for the activation of efficacy, namely cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes (Bandura 1994). In terms of cognitive processes Bandura proposed that all action are initially organised in a person's thoughts. People's perception of their efficacy will thus influence the pre-empted cognitive scenarios they construct and rehearse. Consequently a high sense of efficacy will result in the visualisation of success thereby supporting the potential for success. In contrast, persons who doubt their efficacy tend to anticipate failure (Bandura 1994).

Personal beliefs of efficacy play a fundamental role in the self-regulation of motivation insofar that motivation is regulated by personal beliefs and expectation. A direct correlation between goal setting and motivation was identified (Bandura 1994). In this regard it was found that challenging goals enhance and sustain a person's motivation. Goal setting can therefore act as a motivational method which can be used in violence prevention programmes.

Affective processes refer to the emotional reaction to life's challenges, such as stress and depression (Bandura 1994). People with a low level of self-efficacy might find it difficult to exercise control over stressors which play a central role in anxiety arousal. In this regard, anxiety arousal is effected not only by a person's perceived coping efficacy but also by the person's cognitive processes. Behaviour modification can therefore be achieved if therapeutic interventions equip participants' with skills to deal with and control negative emotional reactions. According to Meichenbaum (1977:218) behaviour change

occurs through the interaction of inner speech, cognitive structures and behaviours and their ensuing outcomes. Behaviour change is thus not only a cognitive process, but requires the learning and integration of “new” behaviours as well as behaviour patterns. Violence prevention programmes should therefore include didactic as well as experiential learning elements.

According to Bandura (1994) personal efficacy also influences the type of activities a person choose to take part in as well as the environment a person chooses to function in. This includes the selection of the social group a person chooses to belong to. In terms of youth violence, group aggression is often influenced by societal norms and values as well as environmental factors. Heleta (2007:5) is of the opinion that the de-individualisation processes within social groups could lessen the awareness of personal normative concerns and moral responsibility. De-individualisation is associated with the anonymity a person experiences within a larger group and the adoption of the group’s values. Youth at Risk interventions therefore needs to focus on the improving of efficacy which consequently will impact positively on youths’ pro-social selection processes.

Bandura’s social cognitive theory, especially the knowledge dealing with self-efficacy, is widely used in behaviour modification therapy (Corey 2008:236). The processes involved in the building of efficacy are of importance for this article. The discussion of Bandura’s two theories illustrates processes that could be associated with the learning and un-learning of youth violence. The learning theory of aggression focus on processes which relates to the acquiring of violent behavior, while the social cognitive theory centers on the development of skills to inhibit harmful behaviour, such as violence.

The social cognitive theory furthermore proposes techniques for the development of generic life skills to deal with life’s challenges (Bandura 1994). Frustration is an example of a frequently experienced emotion which could result in aggressive behaviour. According to Berkowitz (in Williams and Clippinger 2002:498) aggression and violence can be the product of frustration due to unmet goals. In this instance aggression is the response to learned behaviour grounded in cognitive, affective, and behavioural exchanges. Aggressive behaviour patterns are reinforced

and sustained by values and norms supporting the notion that aggression pays off and that disputes can be settled, and goals achieved, by acting aggressively (Heleta 2007:8). Thus, if therapeutic interventions teach participants how to respond to frustration and substituted it with a pro-social alternative, the aggressive response cycle can be broken. It can therefore be proposed that effective programmes targeting youth violence has the potential not only to prevent violence, but also to break behavioural patterns associated with violent behaviour.

METHOD

As stated previously, the purpose of the article is to do a theoretical and empirical analysis of the role that youth programmes can play in the prevention of youth violence and crime. A study which was undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of the Silence the Violence programme will be used to demonstrate how a youth prevention programme can contributing to a change in violent attitudes and associated behaviour patterns.

For the purpose of this article it is hypothesised that prevention of violence could effectively prevent and change violent behaviour amongst Youth at Risk, if the participants’ cognitive processes in relation to the causes and impact of violent behaviour are changed. It is proposed that this will result in a change in attitude and subsequent change in behaviour patterns associated with violent behaviour.

Evaluation research was used to assess the effectiveness of the Silence the Violence programmes in terms of the prevention of youth violence. Programme evaluation has a retrospective focus, and establishes the outcomes, effect or impact of the programme by observation or measurement (Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter 2006:412). According to Thomas (2009:123) evaluation studies should ideally happen before, during and after the programme. Thus, for the purpose of this evaluation a quantitative approach with a pre-test multiple post-test design was followed. The design is similar to the one-group pre-test – post-test design with the exception that more than one post-test was conducted. The pre-test was conducted before the programme commenced, followed by a post-test after each of the ten programme sessions. Findings from the summative evaluation which examined evidence based on indicators of programme

effectiveness are presented (Terre Blanche et al. 2006:412). The indicators of effectiveness related to pro-social modification of participants cognitive comprehension, attitude and behaviours concerning violence.

Data collection took place by means of a questionnaire. The sample consisted of 278 secondary school children between the ages of 13 and 20 years from seven schools in the Johannesburg and surrounding areas. These schools were identified by The City of Johannesburg in areas where problems are experienced with youth violence and delinquency. Fifty five percent (55%) of the respondents were female and 45% male.

PROGRAMME SUMMARY

The Silence the Violence programme was developed by Khulisa Crime Prevention Initiative. The programme takes participants on a journey of self-discovery in which participants become aware of the extent and origins of their own violence. Participants' knowledge is developed in relation to the risk and causative factors, as well as the social dynamics of aggression and violent behaviour. Participants are introduced to alternative and more effective non-violent alternative behaviours as well as assisted to develop relevant life skills. The programme illustrates how violence (physical, emotional and verbal) is ingrained in culture and belief systems and how it emerges in daily interactions. Participants learn practical ways to minimise violent behaviour. The programme furthermore aims to empower participants to restore themselves and develop the skills to restore other relationships. As part of this programme, participants confront their violent self and discover their original or true self through a series of facilitated therapeutic techniques. Emphasis is placed on relapse prevention thus equipping participants with skills to maintain their newly acquired pro-social behaviours (Minnaar 2010).

The programme has been presented in South African schools to 2090 youths during the 2009/2010 financial year. It was also presented in the United Kingdom to amongst others 25 youths in youth offender facilities (Merrifield 2010).

Discussion and findings

As stated previously, the research consisted of a pre-test, which was completed before the group

commenced followed by a post-test after each of the ten session. The pre-test acted as the baseline against which findings from the post-tests were compared. The following concepts were measured:

- Social value perspectives towards violence and violent behaviour.
- Personal attitudes towards violence and violent behaviour.
- Attitude towards life and future perspective.

Social value perspectives towards violence and violent behaviour

Social value perspectives are value judgements based on attitudes and behaviour which is deemed to be acceptable or unacceptable in a society. These perceptions are often rooted in cultural-, gender- and/or community-based norms and beliefs.

Statement 1 It is ok for the poor to steal from the rich	Pre-test	Post-test Session 1
Never	70.8	71.6
Sometimes	20.1	20.2
Half of the time	4.5	4.6
Often	1.3	1.8
Always	3.2	1.8

The majority of the respondents 70.8% (pre-test) and 71.6% (session 1 post-test) indicated that it is "never" acceptable for the poor to steal from the rich. In contrast, more than a quarter of the respondents (pre- and post-test) indicated that it is "sometimes" to "always" acceptable for the poor to steal from the rich. This pro-criminal belief is an example of a value system which could have developed from family and sub-cultural influences as well as symbolic modeling (compare Siegel and Welsh 2009:131). Tshivula (1998:18) associates this type of attitude with perceived entitlement which, according to her, is a risk factor associated with crime and delinquency in South Africa

Statement 2 It is OK for a man to hit his girlfriend or wife if she does not listen to him	Pre-test	Post-test Session 1
Never	74.8	75.0
Some times	17.0	17.0
Half of the time	3.1	3.6
Often	4.4	4.5
Always	.6	0

Nearly a quarter (pre- and post-test) of the respondents indicated that it is "sometimes" to "always" acceptable for a man to hit his girlfriend or wife if she does not listen to him. This perception most probably emanates from an archaic male dominated belief system which found it acceptable for a man to physically punish his wife. Even though in the minority,

such beliefs are alarming set against the background of South Africa's high rate of gender-based and domestic violence. Similar to the previous questions, a slight positive change in attitude can be observed after the first session.

Statement 3 It is OK to use force or violence to get what you want	Pre-test	Post test Session 1
Never	72.0	75.9
Sometimes	18.6	18.8
Half of the time	3.1	3.6
Often	3.7	1.8
Always	2.5	0.0

The majority of respondents (72% pre-test and 75.9% session 1 post-test) indicated that it is "never" acceptable to use force or violence to get what you want. A significant change in attitude can be noted between the pre-test assessment and the evaluation (post-test) done after session 1. Notwithstanding this, it is still concerning to note that nearly 25% (session 1 post-test) of the respondents are of the opinion that it is "sometimes" to "always" acceptable to use violence to get what you want.

Findings from the statements above reflect a general attitude of self entitlement and disrespect for other people's rights. Similar findings from various youth studies (Philp 2009) concluded that the prevailing anti-social value system are created by bad parenting, poverty, poor role models and materialism which subsequently increasing the risk of youth delinquency. According to Ward (Philp 2009) these youths develop a materialistic driven self-identity where materialistic possessions play a fundamental role in their acceptance and status within a peer group. In this regard self-entitlement is a cognitive distortion which might result in offenders perceiving their desires and beliefs as paramount while victims' rights are perceived as secondary. Feelings of self-entitlement are furthermore linked with a lack in the ability to display empathy (Burn & Brown 2006:230). Pelsner (2008:13) is of the opinion that crime prevention initiatives which target youth at risk is only effective, if elements which focus on the development of an empathy is included.

Findings from session 1 to 3 point to a slight positive change in attitude which can be associated with the development of knowledge and change in cognitions relating to violence and violent behavior. Even though this change is minor it is positive to note that the change occurred after only the first session of

the programme.

Statement 4 It is OK to play music loudly late at night	Pre-test	Post test Session 1
Never	47.5	52.7
Sometimes	35.4	32.7
Half of the time	8.2	5.5
Often	1.9	3.6
Always	7.0	5.5

Even though the majority of respondents, in both the pre- and post-test, were of the opinion that it is never acceptable to play music loudly late at night, it is interesting to note the statistical difference between the pre-test (47.5%) and the post-test (52.7%). This could be ascribed to the development of knowledge and insight into the conceptual ideas which underpin violence and aggression. In general, participants perceive violence as limited to physical and verbal aggression. The programme succeeded in changing participants cognitions in relation to how violence (physical, emotional and verbal) is ingrained in culture and belief systems and how it emerges in daily interactions.

Statement 5 People who do not fight back if someone threatens or hurts them are sissies and weak	Pre-test	Post test session 1
Never	54.7	63.1
Sometimes	25.2	26.1
Half of the time	8.8	6.3
Often	6.3	3.6
Always	5.0	.9

Findings from this question are evenly distributed. During the pre-test, a slight majority of respondents (54.7%) indicated that if people do not retaliate after a threat or violence this is not an indication that they are "sissies" or weak. In contrast, 44.3% were of the opinion that not retaliating if you are threatened or victimized is a sign of weakness. Research conducted on peer victimisation in schools, found that the reasons for school violence were predominantly of an egocentric nature, namely the aggressor's desire to show their dominance, for the fun of it and as retaliatory behaviour (Prinsloo and Naser, 2007:51). This is an example of a stereotype belief that could contribute to violence. In this regard peer relationships were found to play central roles in the learning of aggressive behaviour patterns, particularly during adolescent years (Kreager 2007). In some instances nonaggressive individuals, when under pressure from a group, could act aggressively and violently, especially in the case of young people who do not want to be

seen as weak in the eyes of their friends (Heleta 2007:6).

Similar to the previous statement, a change in respondents' perceptions (from 54.7% pre-test to 63.1 % post-test) can be noted, indicating the development of knowledge and understanding of the interactional processes associated with violent cognitions. In accordance with Bandura's social learning theory of aggression, this is an example where behaviour modification occurred through the interaction of inner speech, cognitive structures and behaviours (Bandura 1994). This consequently resulted in a change in attitude and behavioural outcomes.

As stated previously, violent behaviour frequently emanates from cultural values and norms where aggressive behaviour is accepted and often rewarded (Burton 2008:xi-xii). In South Africa, which is a predominant male dominated society, cultural values dictate male stereotype role expectations. Males are viewed as dominant members in society and power relations are frequently upheld by violence. Beliefs associated with cultural norms and values can result in the development of cognitive distortions which can be linked to youth violence (Stuijt 2009). In this regard Lambert, Hogan, Barton and Stevenson (2007:3) found that violence prevention initiatives which target Youth at Risk are effective if it focuses on cognitive distortions and perpetrator's lack in empathy.

Notwithstanding this, it is positive to note that the change in respondents' cognitions and attitude already took place after only one session. Changing ingrained cognitive perceptions, especially those linked to cultural norms and values in a society, is not an effortless process (Siegel and Welsh 2009: 132-133). In order to achieve change in an individual, you also need to change the culture (e.g. values, norms and beliefs) of society in general. Programmes targeting the youth are a good starting point to set this change process in motion, because as stated previously, South Africa's youth constitute a substantial proportion of the general population (Statistics South Africa 2009).

Personal attitudes towards violence and violent behaviour

In accordance with Bandura (Pajares 2002) aggressive behaviour is learned by means of the observation of, and interaction with models of

violence. Individuals, especially young people who are exposed to these models of violence, tend to integrate the values and norms which then manifest in their behaviour patterns. The following statements focus on this part of the learning process and explore respondents' personal attitudes to violence and violent behaviour.

Statement 6 I act in a violent manner (e.g. cursing, hitting, shouting and breaking things)	Pre-test	Post test Session 1
Never	58.9	55.5
Sometimes	29.1	33.6
Half of the time	3.8	4.5
Often	6.3	6.4
Always	1.9	0

In the pre-test 41.1 % of the respondents and 44.5% in the post-test acknowledged that they "sometimes" to "often" act in a violent manner.

Statement 7	Pre-test I hit/bullied someone before	Session 10 I am still violent/ abusive towards other people
Never	48.1	42.9
Sometimes	31.3	37.1
Half of the time	7.5	1.4
Often	7.5	14.3
Always	5.6	4.3

In contrast to statement 6, more respondents in statement 7 indicated that they act in a violent manner (pre-test 51.9% and the session 10 post-test 57.1%). The statistical higher number in statement 7 could be ascribed to the fact that learning took place and that respondents understand which actions amount to violent behaviour. This concurs with findings in statements 4 and 5. Accountability for personal behaviour, as stated previously, is strongly emphasised in the Silence the Violence programme. The fact that respondents are willing to acknowledge their own violent behavior, furthermore indicates that they developed the skills to show empathy and understand the impact their behaviour has on others.

Statement 9 I have a violent side	Pre-test	Post-test Session 1
Never	49.4	40.5
Sometimes	26.9	36.0
Half of the time	11.9	13.5
Often	6.3	5.4
Always	5.6	4.5

The term "violent side" was explained to the respondents as representing attitudes and behaviour which might result in physical, emotional and/or verbal violence. In retrospect, 59.5% indicated that they have a violent side as compared to the pre-test where only 50.1% acknowledged that they are "sometimes" to "always" violent. Similarly to previous

statements, findings indicated that the respondents developed an understanding of their personal attitudes and behaviour.

Statement 10 My life is similar to what happens in the cycle of violence	Post-test session 2
Never	22.8
Sometimes	42.1
Half of the time	19.3
Often	7.0
Always	8.8

The theory of violence, which includes the cycle of violence, was discussed during session 2. Seventy-seven percent (77.2%) of respondents are of the opinion that their lives are “sometimes” to “always” similar to the cycle of violence. During this session, the respondents became aware of the interactional relationship between being a victim and the perpetrators of violence and the influence aggressive modeling can have on their own behaviour and attitudes (compare Siegel 2010:305, Bandure 1994 & Kreager 2007:705).

Findings from the statements in this section can be explained from the context of Bandura’s reciprocal determinism. The process of sustained, reciprocal interaction between behaviour, cognitive and environmental influences reinforce behaviour that were perceived as socially acceptable. The introduction of respondents to an alternative pro-social set of beliefs, such as being done in the Silence the Violence programme, alter their pre-empted cognitive scenarios consequently impacting on personal attitudes and behaviours. This draws attention to the importance of concentrating on cognitive distortions in programmes which focus on youth violence (Pelsers 2008:13).

Attitude towards life and future perspective

Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory emphasises the role self-efficacy can play in the learning of behaviour. As stated previously, self-efficacy relates to people’s perceptions of the goals they can achieve and their ability to deal with difficult tasks (Burger 2008:380). Perceived efficacy is of importance because it has an influence on a person’s attitude towards their own life and future perspective. A positive future perspective is of importance for the development of a person’s self-concept. It is furthermore an important attribute for personal development. In contrast, people with a pessimistic future perspective often find it difficult to cope with negative elements in their

circumstances. They tend to feel helpless and not in control of their lives and circumstances (Faul & Hanekom 2002).

Statement 11 What I want in life is outside of my reach	Pre-test	Post test Session 1
Never	33.8	44.7
Sometimes	30.4	25.2
Half of the time	12.8	7.8
Often	10.8	9.7
Always	12.2	12.6

The majority of respondents (66.2% pre-test and 55.3% post-test) are of the opinion that what they want in life is “sometimes” to “always” out of their reach. Similar to this, findings from statement 12 also reflect low levels of efficacy.

Statement 12 It is easy for other people to get what they want	Pre-test	Post-test Session 1
Never	13.8	11.2
Sometimes	46.1	60.7
Half of the time	16.4	12.1
Often	11.2	8.4
Always	12.5	7.5

The majority of respondents (86.2% pre-test and 88.8% post-test) were of the opinion that it is “half of the time” to “always” easier for other people to get what they want. Findings from both these statements reflect a low level of efficacy which can be associated with a more pessimistic future perspective.

In contrast, the following statement shows that the Silence the Violence programme assisted respondents to develop higher levels of efficacy.

Statement 13 I can break my own cycle of violence	Session 10
Never	16.9
Sometimes	33.8
Half of the time	5.6
Often	9.9
Always	33.8

Nearly 50% of respondents are of the opinion that they are “half of the time” to “always” able to break their own cycle of violence, while 33.8% indicated that they are “sometimes” able to break their own cycle of violence.

Statement 14 I can change the bad things in my life into good things	Session 10
Never	2.7
Sometimes	30.1
Half of the time	4.1
Often	15.1
Always	47.9

It is positive to note that the majority of respondents (97.3%) indicated that they can change the bad things in their lives into good things. Findings from these two statements reflect a more positive future perspective. It can therefore be concluded that the programme

content assisted respondents to develop a higher levels of self-efficacy. This is of importance because a strong sense of efficacy enhances a person's perception and ability to approach difficult tasks as achievable challenges which is essential for personal development (Bandura 1994).

Statement 15 People tell me I have changed since I started the programme	Session 6
Never	9.8
Sometimes	34.8
Half of the time	13.0
Often	18.5
Always	23.9

Ninety percent (90.2%) of the respondents indicated that other people told them they have changed since they started the programme. Positive feedback act to reinforce behavior, which in this instance will enforce the pro-social attitudes and behaviour learned during the programme.

DISCUSSION

Findings from the programme evaluation found that the Silence the Violence programme can be effectively used as an early prevention programme to address violence and violent behaviour amongst youths. The programme is effective, because it facilitates cognitive development and creates opportunities for the participants to be exposed to alternative pro-social learning experiences. Didactic and experiential learning elements are used to replace violent cognitions and attitudes with pro-social alternatives, thus empowering the respondent with the knowledge on how to make non-violent decisions.

Even though the Silence the Violence programme is an example of only one programme that is successfully used as an early violence prevention initiative, valuable lessons can be learned from it. In the first instance this programme acts as an example of a good practice based on its theoretical foundation. Its effectiveness has furthermore been established through national and international programme evaluations (Minnaar 2010). Both these factors are central in assuring the efficiency of prevention programmes as well as the replication of services. Regrettably, few service providers to youth at risk are committed to the scientific development and/or evaluation of prevention initiatives (Frank 2003:24).

The Silence the Violence programme is furthermore an example of a violence

prevention programme which make use of behaviour modification techniques to respond to aggressive attitudes and behaviour which has been acquired through a process of social learning. Findings from this study concur with Bandura's social learning theory of aggression behaviour which proposes that behavior modification can be achieved through reciprocal determinism by making use of the interaction processes between behaviour, cognitive and environmental influences (Pajares 2002). Didactic and experiential learning can be used to inhibit pro-violent behaviours and attitudes as well as to reinforce pro-social conduct and mind-sets.

The social cognitive theory proposes making use of techniques for the development of generic life skills in order to heighten efficacy (Corey 2008:236). In this instance the Silence the Violence programme introduces participants to alternative non-violent behaviours to deal with daily challenges, such as frustrations and the achievement of goals. The programme also includes relationship building skills, thus equipping participants with skills to develop and restore relationships.

CONCLUSION

Youth violence is an internationally recognised problem and highlights the importance of early prevention initiatives. Even though The National Crime Prevention Strategy (1996) and The White Paper for Social Welfare (1997) emphasise the importance of pro-active crime prevention the implementation of such initiatives are the exception rather than the rule.

The responsibility for youth prevention initiatives in South Africa is mostly taken on by organisations in civil society. These initiatives are frequently hampered by a lack in funding. Furthermore, various studies have been done to explore the causes and effects of youth violence as well as to propose possible solutions, but very few studies in which current practices are evaluated (compare Burton 2008; Pelsner 2008; Burton 2007; Hu & Salie-Kagee 2007; Leoschut 2006). This consequently limits the possibility to replicate "good practices". It is such factors that have become stumbling blocks in the implementation of youth violence and crime preventions initiatives.

Article 28(2) of South Africa's Constitution stipulates that "A child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child". Even though research,

such as presented in this article, gives evidence of the benefits of programmes which focus on violence prevention can hold for South Africa's youth, organisational realities and practices often deprive them of these opportunities.

Leonard Eron (Heleta 2007:11) however states that "what is learned can be unlearned and new ways of behaving can be adopted". The potential and means to pro-actively address

youth violence in South Africa exists. In practice, the challenge lies in overcoming the stumbling blocks on operational level. In this regard it is practitioners' and youth workers' responsibility to translate South Africa's Constitution into actions and thereby ensure that the best interest of each child remains a priority.

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